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A View on the Dialectic Between the Individual and the Environment

Mila Martínez

The analysis of the relationship between the individual, their perception of the external world and their behaviour in it opens up the discussion of human agency and the dialectic of the individual and the social, and the individual and the environment. This essay will discuss this dialectic and will hint at possible ways to map the relationships between, on the one hand, Indigenous peoples and white Australia; and, on the other, between the rural and urban space which they inhabit and which, simultaneously, shape their identity as much as it is shaped by its inhabitants. It will also discuss how power and meaning are conditioned by subjectivity and space.
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When Europeans think of Australia, one of the first thoughts that probably comes to mind is that it is a very distant country with a different time zone. This proves to be true when travelling to it. Travellers are exposed to a physical and mental displacement which affects their experience of being and it is associated with a certain amount of discomfort. The physical displacement is usually accompanied by a disruption of behavioural, biological and psychological rhythms commonly known as "jet lag", to which it can be added the sometimes uncomfortable disturbance of regular eating habits as a result of being served meals at unusual hours, according to the new time zones we are travelling through. The mental displacement is of a different nature. Psychology tells us that we all inhabit multiple spaces at once in which we are different beings simultaneously. It also tells us that we have space-based identities, which differ one from another depending on the culture in which we grow up, but provide us with a deictic sense of us and the place we move in. So it seems

that we are not able to think about ourselves and the world outside us without placing both in some kind of real or imaginary space. This territoriality of our experience is rendered into a geographical perspective of the world we live in and the emotional and psychological experiences that go with it. In her article "Ground Rules and Social Maps for Women: An introduction", that has inspired me to write this paper, Shirley Ardener, suggests that space not only *speaks* but "it is as if we have two maps: one that locates us in ordinary space-time, and another consisting of an interior territory of a psychological nature in which we are located at the same time" (Ardener 1-2).

David Lowental wrote a very interesting analysis on how individuals understand their external worlds. He drew on anthropological evidence to affirm that there is a physical realm, organised through language, common to all people who experience it, even though it can be symbolised in different ways. And this external world is not just a world of co-existing facts but it is profoundly spatial. Thus, "territoriality", understood as the division and ownership of territory, will differ from group to group, and it will be somehow shaped in a number of ways by feelings (Lowental 241-260). From this perspective some theorists, like Money-Kyrle, point out that a solid shared world and a stable sense of oneself within that world are necessary for one's psychic and physical survival (Money-Kyrle 96).

Lowental's work opened the path to the analysis of the relationship between the psychology of the individual, their perception of the external world and their behaviour in it. This opens up the discussion of human agency and the dialectic of the individual and the social, and the individual and the environment. This essay will discuss this dialectic and will hint at possible ways to map the relationships between, on the one hand, Indigenous and white Australia; and, on the other, between the rural and urban space which they inhabit and which, simultaneously, shape their identity as much as it is shaped

by them. It will also discuss how power and meaning are conditioned by subjectivity and space.

In *The Body and the City*, Steven Pile suggests that the relationship between the external and the internal world is based in symbolic exchanges located in time and space. Individuals are constantly engaged in linking symbols of all kinds to the constructs of their self-images. This is particularly evident when thinking of Australia, a country where many cultures coexist and overlap in the shadow of one primitive and original culture which was about to be extinguished as a result of its encounter with the alien world brought by the European colonization in 1788.

I began this paper by describing the first experiences which European travellers would have when travelling to that foreign and distant country which is Australia. And I chose to describe that experience in coordinates of time and space. The reason to do this is that these coordinates seem to be even more relevant after the arrival in cities like Melbourne or Sydney. They are modern, sophisticated and thriving metropolis, which captivate the traveller with their dynamism, prosperity and a sense of on-going possibilities of change and progress. The country which was once thought to be the confinement of convicts has become for many their own "Eldorado".

This is the first glimpse of Australia that most travellers first encounter but it is not the only one. Far away from the coast, travelling thousand of miles inland through a mythical and extraordinary landscape, other Australians, the original dwellers of this land, struggle to survive in a world which has been profaned and which is still threatened. For millennia before the arrival of the white peoples, Indigenous peoples lived a dignified existence by hunting and gathering, keeping a close and respectful relationship with their environment. Australian Indigenous peoples believe the earth is sacred and it contains a seed power called *jiva* or *guruwari*. In the Indigenous world-view, every event or life that occurs in a particular place leaves behind a residue as plants leave behind

their seeds. So the natural world becomes a footprint of the metaphysical beings whose actions created it. Indigenous peoples do not subscribe to the myth of the atomised individual. They extend their sense of the self to include the family, the nation, the Dreaming trails, the landscape and the cosmos.

An Aboriginal legend tells the story of three sisters called Meehni, Wimlah and Gunnedoo from the Katoomba tribe, who fell in love with three brothers of the Nepean tribe. Their tribal laws prohibited their marriage but the three brothers didn't accept the law and tried to capture the three sisters by force. That stirred a great dispute between the two tribes which went to war. Afraid of the three sisters getting hurt, the witchdoctor decided to turn them into rocks until the battle was over. But the witchdoctor was killed in the battle and the three beautiful sisters remain today as the beautiful rock formation known as the Three Sisters Mountain. Indigenous Australia speaks earth language and exudes a spirituality which comes from below, or paraphrasing Meister Eckhart, of a heaven which is as much below our feet as above our head. Does this spirituality which links mankind to earth apply to the rest of Australia? Is this modern, industrialised and wealthy country eager to have a multiple identity or will it choose to keep intact its white Anglo-identity against the threatening tide of foreign, prospective settlers from other races? According to Pile, the identity of white Australia is linked to the city, which becomes a metaphor for power and civilisation as well as mind and space, in which buildings mobilise, organise and house different times, spaces and functions.

Ardener's article explores time and space in relationship to women and the dwelling place as a symbol of an entwined system of power relationships based on gender differentiation. She starts by pointing out that the use of spatial terms is also embedded in language. Terms such as `high society´, `wide application´, `spheres of interest´, `narrow-mindedness´, `political circles´, `deep divides of opinion´, and so on, corroborate this idea and establish a link between the "real" physical world and the social reality. Following Goffman's

argument, Shirley Ardener says that the division of hierarchies and social structure is depicted micro-ecologically, that is, through the use of small-scale metaphors. This suggests two things: on the one hand, space reflects social organisation; on the other, space exerts its own influence, so the place of action determines action. From this point of view, and using an extreme example, most people would probably agree that a dozen people nude on a nudist beach is not the same thing as a dozen people nude in the House of Commons.

Ardener also asserts that behaviour and space are mutually dependent. She agrees with Judy Matthews regarding the fact that social identity is partly determined by social constituents of the group's environments, that is, people define space as well as space defines the people in it. Thus, the `Court´ is where the king is and `churchgoers´ are people who go to church. Ardener says, now paraphrasing Goffman, that objects are affected by the place in space of other objects. Three separate pieces of cloth, one green, one white, and one orange can mean nothing in particular. The same pieces sewn together and hanging from a flagpole do definitely mean something.

In his book *Cultural Representations and Signifying Practices*, Stuart Hall highlights how representation produces meaning by reminding us of a very important premise: things – objects, peoples, events in the world – do not have in themselves any previous or fixed meanings. It is us who make things meaningful. Therefore, things will change from culture to culture, from individual to individual, from place to place. So, a stone on a beach is not the same thing as a stone on a road and it is not the same thing as a stone in a museum. Even colours can have meanings. Among the Atoni of Indonesia, south is red (it is also associated with rulers), east is white (and it is connected with warriors), west is black (and it is associated with the village headman) and the north is yellow. And space, colour and meaning can also interrelate with each other, as happens with the Irish flag, where green symbolizes the native people of Ireland, orange stands for the British supporters of William of Orange

who settled in Northern Ireland in the 17th century and white, in the centre of the flag represents, peace between Roman Catholics and Protestants. Accordingly, not only the presence of an object but quite often its absence can be very important, as we will see later.

The study of space brings also into consideration the notion of boundaries, both physical and symbolic, where the difference between "what it is" and "what it is not" is put to test. The lavish hospitality shown occasionally to guests at the Spanish table is an example of lowering the defences of the family's circle and opening the doors to a stranger. Moreover, it suggests that the visitors are outsiders; otherwise they would not be presented with a banquet. The realities of everyday life offer many possibilities to explore how place is socially constructed. The home also becomes an expression of the self. Its location in the city landscape and its intrinsic qualities in terms of the building's age, construction and style reinforce identity and status in its dwellers.

Andrew Sayer summarizes the relationship of the subject, space and society this way:

> What you are depends not just in what you have, together with how you conceive yourself, but on how others relate to you, on what they understand you to be, and to a considerable extent on how people have to adopt meanings, roles, and identities which pre-exist them. (Sayer 206)

This multiplicity of identities that we are constantly enacting in our never-ending encounters with the other are dictated, to a lesser or greater extent, by structures of meaning and power. Pile also refers to Stallybrass and White's work, *In the Politics and Poetics of Transgression*, where they argue that European cultures are ordered and maintained through the social distinction of

high and low value, which they illustrate providing a categorical distinction of the body, which they term "classical and grotesque". They point out that orifices are absent in classical statues while low value representations of the body usually use grotesque masks and costumes with prominent breasts, belly, buttocks and genitals. These distinctions are important not only because they speak of differences, whether they are of class, race, gender, sexuality and so on, but because they draw attention to the fact that those nets of meaning, identity and power are not possible without distinctions between high and low (*place*, again) and without the articulation of those distinctions in the domains of the body and the city.

What is interesting about Stallybrass and White's perspective, Pile adds, is that for the powerful to proclaim themselves as high value, they need to find, name and maintain others who are not of high value. This explains why the powerful are constantly looking at things which are considered outside them to denigrate them and see them as opposite and separate. They look at them with desire and disgust, in complete fascination with the "other". Stallybrass and White also establish an internal relationship between power and fear (expressed as shame, embarrassment or disgust and desire), which manifests itself in the city in different ways such as the sewer, the slum, the rat, the proletarian, the nomad, the bourgeois and the prostitute.

In the nineteen century European city, the fear of difference became a reality through the gap between the suburbs and the slums, the grand building and the gutter, the respectable classes and the lumpen. The "other" was perceived not only as a separate entity but as a possible agent of pollution and contamination. In 1844 Engels described a situation in Manchester in which the slums where hidden behind respectable streets with shops. And in postcolonial discourses, the lives of the savages were described as "dirty". This aversion to "dirt", deeply engrained in some cultures and which exerts an important role in the early years of the individuals who belong to them, is always latent in the

transformations of cities. “Dirty” and “ugly” are usually linked and they are hidden from view. Power, social, and economic inequalities of cities all over the world coexist with the creativity, energy and enthusiasm of the thousands or millions of peoples who live in them.

But not everybody is allowed their own space. Alienation and marginality are created as a sub-product of a landscape which maps visible and invisible relations of power. The cityscape is legible because it leaves clear markings of where the individual is. It also informs the individual of where they can be. Strolling through the streets of Melbourne, the traveller often runs into objects which remind them of Indigenous cultures. Art galleries and shops exhibit and sell boomerangs, paintings, and musical instruments, such as, *didgeridoos* and *rainsticks*. In the past, museums dedicated several rooms to explain the history of Indigenous peoples and the impact of the European colonization on them. And a quick look at the syllabus of most schools and colleges in town nowadays shows how easy it is to find courses on Indigenous Australia. But, where are they? One can live six months in Melbourne and can never encounter an Indigenous-looking person. One can hear about them, read about them, contemplate the artefacts they create, but one is rarely able to see them. It seems as if the city which celebrates their culture in earnest has cast them outside its boundaries.

Many agree that Melbourne and Sydney’s skylines represent one of the faces of capitalism. The mobility of capital investment in cities is usually reflected in tall structures, such as, monuments and skyscrapers. This idea is further developed in Pile’s book by De Certau, who claims that the view from above creates a city scene that celebrates its dynamism, the excesses of money and power and its energy and vitality, which complement each other. Deprived of identity, tall buildings become ultimate symbols of power and money. The entrepreneurial city detaches itself from earth, creating new spaces of segregation of public space and private space, of culture and nature.

De Certeau's view poses an interesting opposition between "from above" and "from down below" which adds another approach to the two main narratives which interweave and overlap in current Australia and that have been sketched through this paper. The conflicts, spurred on by the clash of two opposite world views, can be traced to and within the cities, which, as the spaces where the structures of power are located, produce actions, thoughts and beliefs that trigger some of those tensions. While this dynamics is taking place, Australia has another challenge to meet: the constant flow of new migrants who threatens once again its white identity.

This paper began by inviting the reader to stretch their imagination and travel to Australia. It also invited the reader to ponder on issues – identities, displacement, space, city as centre of power- which affect everyone and which take place anywhere. Finally, this paper aimed, although it was not stated, to bring Australia closer and to suggest that the most defying challenges Australians face are within them as much as these challenges are within all of us regardless of what country we are living in. As Aldous Huxley put it:

> Our mind still has its darkest Africas, its unmapped Borneos and Amazonian basins… A man consists of … an Old World of personal consciousness and, beyond a dividing sea, a series of New Worlds… Some people never consciously discover their antipodes. Others make an occasional landing (Huxley 67).

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